

## Deterring to Lead? Nuclear Crises, Non-State Proxies, and India's Regional Leadership

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*Article*

# Deterring to Lead? Nuclear Crises, Non-State Proxies, and India's Regional Leadership

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## Abstract

Why is India unable to maintain regional leadership in a nuclearized South Asia? In this paper, we explore the impediments to India's regional leadership by examining Delhi's foreign policy behavior within the nuclearized rivalry with Pakistan since 1998. Based on a comparison of Indian foreign policy elites' responses to a set of dyadic crises since overt nuclearisation in 1998, we argue that structural parameters of South Asia's current security environment undermine the prospects of coercing or influencing the behavior of India's most potent contender. More specifically, we argue that Delhi's failure to develop an effective strategy to deter armed resistance is largely due to the combined presence of militant groups and inadequate deterrence strategies. Recurrent, undeterred militant attacks have thus become a symbol of resistance against India's predominance in the region.

## Keywords

Regional Powers, Complex Balancing, India, Pakistan, Deterrence, Nuclear Terrorism

## Introduction

Extant International Relations (IR) scholarship on contemporary power transitions has largely focused on the activism of rising powers in their relations to established great powers and in specific policy areas in global governance (Gray & Murphy 2013; Kahler 2013; Paul 2016; Stuenkel 2016a). While there is neither academic nor policy consensus on which countries should be defined as "rising" or "emerging" powers, most studies in the past decade have included China, India, Brazil, and South Africa in this category based on material (mainly economic and military) indicators (Stuenkel 2016b). As a result, there is little discussion in this

literature over how the situation of these so-called rising powers first emerged and eventually came to dominate a particular regional order. Are rising powers automatically regional powers or leaders? Is regional power status a static one or does it need to be maintained? Barring a few exceptions, much of the existing literature has neglected the process of formation, and especially of the maintenance, of regional leadership. To contribute to this debate, this paper addresses the following puzzle: why has India not been able to maintain regional leadership in a nuclearized South Asia?

More specifically, this paper seeks to understand the impediments to India's regional leadership by examining Delhi's foreign policy behavior within the nuclearized rivalry with Pakistan since 1998 in four steps. First, the paper reviews the literature on India's deliberate and indirect claims to regional leadership in South Asia, and its limitations in accounting for regional dynamics since 1998. Second, the paper discusses the theoretical assumptions about the links between regional leadership and nuclear deterrence as well as their limitations in accounting for the complex regional dynamics in South Asia. A third section looks at the increasing use of non-state actors as a foreign policy tool by Pakistan since the late 1980s and examines India's attempts to manage proxy contestation in order to preserve its regional leadership in nuclear South Asia. Finally, we conclude and suggest ways in which our empirical observations from the South Asian case can inform scholarship on contested regional leadership and deterrence.

The South Asia case illustrates that neither does economic capacity necessarily translate into military capabilities nor do capabilities automatically correlate with influence (cp. Brooks & Wohlforth 2016). While "economic growth and a large and diverse economy are certainly necessary preconditions of power" and "a basic component of India's rise", it is less clear "how economic growth could provide the strategic basis for India's rise" (Khilnani 2015, p.688). Contemporary South Asia thus purportedly constitutes a case of "unipolarity without hegemony" (Wilkinson 1999; Buzan 2011) with India's role limited to that of a "reluctant hegemon" (Mitra 2003). This feature complicates applying existing IR models premised on a close correlation between capabilities, influence, and domination to South Asia and renders it a deviant case of systemic Security Studies scholarship and thus an illustrative and critical example of regional leadership in times of multipolarity (cp. Thomas 2004, p.326).

### **Regional Leadership in South Asia: Limits to India's Claim?**

Leadership can be understood as "the ability to make others follow goals and positions which these others did not previously share and/or to make others support an increase in status and power of the emerging power" (Schirm 2010,

p.200).<sup>1</sup> Leadership is distinct from the traditional Realist definition of regional hegemony which understands hegemony as states that are “significantly stronger than other states in the system on both economic and military dimensions; (b) aware of its power preponderance and willing to use it to shape its international environment according to its interests and values; and (c) active in the building, developing, and sustaining of various international institutions, which reflect the negotiation and renegotiation of hegemonic bargains with other states in the system” (Jesse et al. (2012, p.7). In contrast, we build our understanding of leadership inductively by tracing the social interactions and the roles played and responsibilities assumed by the Indian state, an approach inspired by more recent English School conceptualizations of hegemony (Clark 2011).

Regional leadership is commonly associated with three factors: power resources, claim to leadership, and acceptance of leadership by other powers in the region (cp. Prys 2012). While the Indian state has possessed considerable advantages in terms of national power capabilities compared to its South Asian neighbors and made some claims for leadership since 1947, it has overall failed to garner regional acceptance of this status. First, regarding the evolution of the distribution of power capabilities, the contemporary South Asian region has been characterized by a unipolar system with a highly unequal distribution of material capacities, with India as the sole pole and Pakistan lagging far behind as the secondary regional power (Ebert & Blarel 2018). In fact, the distribution of power capabilities between India and Pakistan (and thereby with other regional actors) since 1947 has been constantly asymmetric and substantially favorable to India. Second, Indian leaders have long sought to play a role commensurate to India's geographic size, economic capacity and political standing in South Asia. Since its independence in 1947, Indian elites have perceived India as the main regional power in the South Asian subcontinent.

With regard to the third criteria, most accounts have noted that while India might have been capable and willing to establish regional leadership, its effectiveness to do so has been limited. In contrast to traditional Realist assumptions on the stabilizing effects of hegemonic power concentrations, India was unable to use its national power capability advantages to establish a stable, peaceful hegemonic order (Mukherjee & Malone 2010, pp.57–63). In South Asia, the dissatisfied yet materially far weaker secondary power, Pakistan, has traditionally initiated armed conflict irrespective of the relative power disadvantage, including three out of four wars fought between the two rivals. In 1947, when relative capabilities were already substantially favouring India, which received 70 percent of the colonial British Indian army's movable military infrastructure and military officers,

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the different types of regional leadership, see the introduction to this special issue by Fflemes and Ebert.



Pakistan's political-military leadership provoked the first war over Kashmir, again defied its relative capability disadvantage in the second Kashmir war in 1965, supported an insurgency against the central government in Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir in 1990, and launched a military operation in Jammu and Kashmir's Kargil heights in 1999 (Ganguly 2001, pp.19–20). Similarly, deviating from wide-spread Liberal Institutionalist propositions, the rising regional power has been unable to build institutions to increase its legitimacy or foster regional integration through the provision of public goods. South Asia thus remains the “world's politically and economically *least* integrated, as well as one of the most violent regions” (Cohen 2015, p.341).

Despite its national power capability advantages, New Delhi has been unable to formulate a way of dispatching, compromising with, or ignoring its regional challenger Pakistan (Chari, Cheema, and Cohen 2007, 190). India's former Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, even acknowledged that India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as his two predecessors, Manmohan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had been conscious that “heightened tensions with Pakistan constrain India's ability to play a larger regional and global role” and “create space for intervention by major powers, in particular the US and China” (Saran 2015). Moreover, India's more recent foreign policies toward its Eastern neighbours Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka illustrate how predominantly hegemonic strategies failed to generate followership (Destradi 2012).<sup>2</sup>

India's regional policies have varied over time, from a more or less benign leadership under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to more assertive hegemonic bids under Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi (Hagerty 1991; Prys 2012). Since the early 1990s, India's mostly deliberate strategy of regional dominance has waxed and waned depending on the personalities of Prime Ministers and the political constellations in power. India has resorted to measures ranging from outright military intervention to coercive economic diplomacy to induce

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<sup>2</sup> By contrast, former Indian Foreign Secretary Dixit (2001, pp.56–7) argued that the “assertion that India has hegemonistic ambitions is irrational” given “India's own internal problems, resource constraints and preoccupations with national consolidation (in the face of continuing domestic centrifugal challenges)”, even if “India's physical size, demography, resources, technological capacities and the size of its defence forces make its regional power status an existentialist reality”. Interpreting India's past interventions into Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka as indicators for hegemonic or expansionist ambitions was misleading, as these were requested by the respective governments, resulted from developments in these countries conversely affecting India's security, and ended as soon as the mission was completed or the respective government asked for withdrawal. Echoing these observations, Sridharan argued that India does not even qualify as a ‘regional power’, as it only fulfils one of three criteria for a regional power. While post-independence India has always been preeminent in terms of power resources with the size of its territory, population, economy and military larger than the rest of South Asia combined, it has neither been accepted by regional neighbors as a “natural leader and spokesperson” nor has it had the power of compellence over its neighbors. With the exception of perhaps Bhutan, all other South Asian states, in particular “Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or even Nepal or more recently the Maldives (...) have resisted India's wishes or demands” (Sridharan 2015, p.703).

various neighbors to conform to its expectations. Less discussed as a component of the regional leadership toolkit is the strategy of deterrence. Deterrence has been a key instrument of India's strategy to maximize regional security. India's then-National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra, outlined in 1999 that through its conventional military superiority and a credible nuclear deterrent since 1998, India has aimed to preserve an "environment of durable peace" in the South Asian region (Mishra 1999). Regional stability and peace are deemed essential for Indian decision-makers to ensure its primary goals of domestic "economic, political, social, scientific and technological development" (*ibid.*). This supports the general argument that unipolar powers carry out a "defensive-dominance strategy" to preserve the status quo, mainly existing territorial boundaries and political alignments, as well as freezing the distribution of power in the region (Monteiro 2012, p.23). As a result, while followership presupposes that subordinate actors in the regional system have incentives to support and conform to a hierarchical order, notably because the regional leader provides a type of social order to legitimize its authority (Bukovansky et al. 2012, pp.6–7; Ikenberry 2011, p.6), we argue that a prior condition for the establishment for such an institutionalized regional leadership role is the acceptance of the unipolar security order by subordinate powers.<sup>3</sup> If deterrence is not a tool to ensure social acceptance of regional leadership, it is nevertheless an important instrument to ensure territorial and security stability.

However, this paper will illustrate how India's traditional nuclear deterrence strategy, which had been an important tool to ensure a relatively stable security order, failed to cope with the changing post-Cold War environment and strategies of Pakistan. The combined impact of the nuclearization of the subcontinent and of cross-border militant activity has created an environment prone to low-level violence and persistent contestation of India's regional leadership status. A peculiar set of conditions has emerged that involves a series of previously overlooked non-state actors that have capitalized on the presence of nuclear weapons and increasingly shaped the strategic calculations of New Delhi and Islamabad.<sup>4</sup> These conditions have also increased the costs for India to maintain its regional leader status. To our knowledge, there is no precedence in the literature on regional system leadership management and maintenance for such complex nuclearized environments involving non-state actors. We trace the development and impact of these new dynamics in the next section.

<sup>3</sup> Compare the argument developed by Monteiro (2012, p.23).

<sup>4</sup> Other deficiencies of classic nuclear deterrence theory applied to South Asia have already been covered sufficiently, namely the "deficiencies in deterrence theory pertaining to conflictual dyads involving states differing vastly in size, resources, and power", see Karnad (2005, p.173), and the misleading reliance on unitary models of deterrence stability, see Perkovich (2012)

### **Regional Leadership and Deterrence: Moving Beyond Traditional Assumptions**

Contested regional leadership is a widespread phenomenon and affects the rise of many contemporary rising powers. Responses to concentrations of regional power have taken varying forms (Flemes & Lobell 2015; Ebert & Flemes 2018). A common finding within the literature on strategies of contestation and leadership is that explanatory frameworks traditionally used to account for *global* systemic power interactions (such as balancing and bandwagoning) have not been particularly useful to understand *regional* sub-systemic dynamics, mainly due to specific regional factors and configurations.

This also applies to the attempts made by various scholars to adopt traditional models of nuclear deterrence to explain regional power contests. The study of nuclear deterrence and its implications for regional leadership emerged from the experience of the US-Soviet global nuclear confrontation. Much of this literature has focused on the bipolar opposition and the implications of the nuclear revolution in reducing large-scale wars. Traditional theories of nuclear deterrence modelled nuclear competition as a confrontation between two unitary, rational actors aspiring global dominance (Mesquita & Riker 1982). Building on these assumptions, nuclear “optimists” such as Kenneth Waltz argued that the continued proliferation of nuclear weapons had the potential to reduce the recurrence of conflict (Waltz 1981). Nuclear “optimists” maintained that the possession of nuclear weapons raised the costs of conventional conflicts, increased the risks of escalation, and therefore deterred leaders from engaging in war against nuclear-armed states. Other scholars have been more skeptical, and even actively “pessimistic”, about the alleged stabilizing effects of nuclear weapons. They pointed to the risks of preventive wars, crisis instability, and accidental nuclear detonation (Sagan 1995). According to these nuclear “pessimists”, the possession of nuclear weapons actually contributed to greater levels of international instability.

The end of the Cold War and the spread of nuclear weapons to new players, most of them regional powers, encouraged scholars to reassess the conventional wisdom which had prevailed around deterrence as a leading theoretical and policy framework. Moving away from the US-USSR confrontation and parsimonious models derived from microeconomic theories, some scholars attempted to resume the debate on the effects of nuclear deterrence on stability in new regional settings like the India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation (Sagan 2009; Sagan & Waltz 2002). However, by trying to translate the same theoretical debate to regional contexts, the existing scholarship has overlooked other important factors, especially whether nuclear proliferation may have changing effects over varying regional contests of leadership.



Building on this observation, some scholars have emphasized the differential effects of nuclear proliferation over certain regions and actors. Most recently, Vipin Narang argued that regional powers face different constraints and opportunities than superpowers, have arsenals that are orders of magnitude smaller, and must manage different conflict environments and projected their power and ambitions in smaller geographic areas than the US and USSR did, thus facing different strategic opportunities and constraints (Narang 2014, pp.24–25). These actors had varying success in deterring regional conflict. For instance, India has not been able to deter Pakistan's use of force, such as the 1999 Kargil conflict demonstrated. Israel has also not been able to deter its regional adversaries in 1973, in spite of having nuclear weapons. Consequently, Narang claimed that not all nuclear states act the same way and that state intentions ultimately inform the way nuclear-armed states will behave (*ibid.*). Both the regional hegemon and the regional subordinate power(s) can choose a diverse array of nuclear postures and strategies (capabilities, employment modes, and command-and-control procedures) that diverge significantly from those pursued by nuclear great powers during the Cold War.

Deterrence dynamics in contemporary South Asia provide strong evidence for this deviance from traditional deterrence and security management models. The South Asian subcontinent has witnessed a series of bilateral crises following the acquisition of nuclear weapons from both India and Pakistan in 1998.<sup>5</sup> Various studies argued that the stabilizing effects of nuclear proliferation were hardly automatic in the region (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005; Basrur 2009), and that the possession of nuclear weapons actually facilitated limited or proxy wars (Kapur 2007; Narang 2013). These works notably built on the concept of the “stability-instability paradox” to oppose the strategic stability argument of deterrence.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars demonstrated that the conditions of this phenomenon were for instance present in South Asia: the nuclearization of the subcontinent could be perceived as an insurance policy against the most dangerous types of escalation, thereby encouraging war-making below the nuclear threshold (Krepon 2003).

However, the evolving scholarship on the intricacies of regional deterrence in South Asia has yet to address the issue of how changes in traditional deterrence dynamics and strategies have affected the maintenance of India's regional leadership. In regions with unipolar military balances which had been correlated with a relative absence of major conflicts like South Asia, nuclear weapons have actually

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<sup>5</sup> This paper will not delve into the empirical details of the different South Asian security crises of the last 20 years, encompassing both the “opaque” or *de facto* nuclear period of the 1980s and 1990s before the nuclear tests, and the more recent post-test conflicts, but will instead focus on their theoretical implications for the study of deterrence. For more detailed accounts of these standoffs, see Ganguly and Hagerty (2005), Chari, Cheema, and Cohen (2007), and Ganguly and Kapur (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jervis presented a definition of the paradox: “to the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence”, see *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984),



emboldened states with traditional revisionist ambitions, such as Pakistan, into risk-acceptant behavior (Montgomery & Edelman 2015). India has enjoyed a conventional military superiority over Pakistan since 1947, but in particular since the Indo-Pakistani conflict of 1971. This military imbalance was correlated with almost 30 years of reluctant Pakistani acquiescence of Indian regional leadership and the absence of any major conflicts in the Subcontinent (Ganguly & Kapur 2010, pp.15–16). After 1998, nuclear weapons actually disrupted this military balance and encouraged a more secured Pakistani leadership to resume its historical revisionist territorial goals (Kapur 2007, pp.115–140). As a result, overt nuclear capacities not only failed to deter Pakistan from accepting India's military primacy, but actually created favorable conditions for Pakistan to adopt "aggressive, extremely risky policies" (Ganguly & Kapur 2010, pp.29–30). The following section makes an effort to model how, under conditions of nuclear bipolarity and proxy warfare, the renewed Pakistani contestation of India's regional leadership status and India's ensuing attempts to preserve its deterrence capacities and leadership status have encouraged the outbreak of lower-level crises after decades of regional stability.

### **Mischief Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Implications for Regional Hegemony and Contestation**

The most immediate threat to stability in South Asia since the late 1990s has been the role of non-state groups in instigating major diplomatic crises with escalatory potential between India and Pakistan. There has been a long history of Pakistani-sponsored militants against Indian interests starting immediately after independence. Pakistan's use of these non-state proxies can be explained by two factors. First, due to limited internal resources and extraction capabilities, the Pakistani government has sought to counter-balance the dyadic asymmetry with India by resorting to militant proxies (Kapur 2016). Second, the Pakistani army's strategic culture has also led Pakistan to favor Islamic militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) as regular instruments to contest India's hegemony and the territorial status-quo in Kashmir (Fair, 2014).

Pakistan's use of non-state proxies resumed in the 1980s and became more systematic in the Kashmir region in the late 1980s. Islamabad had previously used mujahedeen forces to destabilize the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and applied a similar strategy in Indian Kashmir when an indigenous uprising erupted in December 1989 (Ganguly 1997). Feeling constrained by India's conventional military superiority, Pakistan has armed, trained, and given sanctuary to these militant organizations through its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), dedicated to establish Pakistani sovereignty over Kashmir (such as the LeT) and used them as tools of asymmetric warfare to tie down large numbers of Indian soldiers in Kashmir.

Following the open nuclearization of the subcontinent in 1998, Pakistan-backed militant groups have launched increasingly aggressive terror operations in India (Fair 2014). For instance, the LeT attacked the Indian Parliament while it was in session on December 13, 2001, and again led a series of carefully planned attacks against civilians in Mumbai in November 2008. Accused by India of helping and harboring terrorists, Pakistani authorities have either denied links with the perpetrators of the attacks, or placed their leaders, like Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, the head of the LeT's charitable front organization, under temporary house arrest.<sup>7</sup>

While Pakistan has benefited from this asymmetric warfare strategy, militant organizations like the LeT have not always shared the aims and/or serve the interests of their sponsor and host state (Ganguly & Kapur 2010; Perkovich 2012). Gradually, the LeT started pursuing a broader global ideological agenda that transcended revisionist territorial ambitions in Indian Kashmir (Phillips 2012; Tankel 2011). Some jihadi organizations in Pakistan like the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) have also turned against the Pakistani government because of its cooperation with US anti-terrorism efforts (Kapur 2016, pp.116–121).

Given the militants' increasing operational and ideological autonomy, the most imminent threat to stability in South Asia arguably results from major diplomatic crises with escalatory potential instigated by these non-state actors. Under conditions of persistent refusal from Pakistan to accept the regional status quo, the escalatory conditions are ripe for terrorist groups to operate with impunity through the protection of the nuclear umbrella, which inherently limits any possible military reprisals. As a result, India was compelled to confront such transnational threats to preserve its regional leadership.

Nuclear postures are traditionally designed to discourage another state from taking military action by making the prospect of costs and risks outweigh prospective gains, in order to freeze the existing territorial status quo. But what happens if nuclear proliferation actually emboldens secondary powers to become revisionist? In addition, what if a third party, such as a transnational non-state actor (like LeT), enters the equation? In the traditional logic of deterrence, India can signal credible nuclear threats, which then make Pakistani-sponsored attacks against India prohibitively expensive. Instead, the fear of nuclear escalation has limited India's strategic options for retaliation and truncated the traditional asymmetry in regional politics.

Non-state groups do not share the same interpretations of the costs and benefits that are presumed to guide the Pakistani authorities when dealing with India

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<sup>7</sup> Hafiz Mohammed Saeed walked free from house arrest in November 2017 after a Pakistan court ordered his immediate release and planned to run for Pakistan's general elections in 2018. See *The Indian Express* (2017).

(Adler 2009). First, in its official doctrine, India does not aim to deter cross-border terrorism or insurgency with the use of nuclear weapons. However, faced with repeated cross-border proxy attacks, India has engaged in debates on how to adapt to this new situation in order to both preserve the credibility of its nuclear deterrent and of its regional leadership. As argued above, dominant powers in unipolar systems have adopted approaches to preserve the status quo and to limit any revisionist efforts. India's determination to maintain its regional leadership status have led New Delhi to develop ad-hoc strategies to counter Pakistan's nuclear blackmail in the context of three major diplomatic crises in 2001–2, 2008, and 2016.

India's efforts to deter further asymmetric attacks by Pakistan have been visible through two different strategies. The first strategy that India has opted was to directly threaten to punish the host state of terrorist groups, Pakistan. By recasting the strategic interaction into a traditional deterrence confrontation between two states, India attempted to maintain its no-first use pledge and its assured retaliation posture intact (Basrur 2009; Narang 2010). By applying nuclear and conventional pressure, India sought to convince the Pakistani host state of the costs of permitting continued attacks. India notably attempted to use this traditional deterrence strategy during the 2001–2002 crisis through a strategy of coercive diplomacy aiming to pressure the Pakistani government into reining its home-based terrorist groups.<sup>8</sup> However the months-long mobilization procedure limited India's window of actual offensive action and proved that such traditional deterring strategies were rendered obsolete by Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. Consequently, the failure of "Operation Parakram" in 2001–2 to obtain definitive Pakistani guarantees to fight terrorism within its own territory demonstrated the practical difficulty of deterring such unconventional, low-level threats with conventional coercive diplomacy (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005).

The realization by the Indian authorities of the failure of traditional deterrence led the Indian military to consider a second option: striking at the militants themselves, notably through its "Cold Start" doctrine (Kanwal 2006; Ladwig 2008; Ahmed 2012; Khan 2012). Following the assault on the Parliament in December 2001, Indian authorities quickly blamed JeM and the LeT but could not retaliate following the attack. These two groups had their camps on Pakistani territory. The 2001–2002 crisis, which followed only two years after the Kargil conflict, encouraged the Indian military to seek a new military doctrine and the capabilities to deter Pakistan from undertaking or from permitting similar low-intensity aggression in the future. The objective of this new informal doctrine was to take hold of an important part of Pakistani territory large enough to harm Pakistan,

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<sup>8</sup> Coercive diplomacy can also be directed at multiple audiences. With Operation Parakram, Indian authorities also attempted to induce external actors like the US to weigh in the crisis and to put pressure on Pakistan to cease its support of terrorist groups.



but not to threaten the state's survival. This strategy partially solved the problem of attribution, which is determinant for successful deterrence.

However, the difficulty with the operationalization of the Cold Start doctrine was that it could have created conditions for escalation and nuclear war. In future crises, Pakistan might not perceive the Indian reprisals as 'limited' and could decide to escalate the confrontation. The situation has further been complicated by the fact that Pakistan continually denied having any connection with or control over the perpetrators of the attacks. Furthermore, these strategies did not solve the long-term problem of militancy based in Pakistan (Ladwig 2008). The absence of any military retaliation following the Mumbai 2008 terrorist attacks, despite clear actionable evidence leading back to elements within Pakistan, demonstrated the difficulties of actually implementing conventional military retaliatory options against this particular type of attack.

Instead, following the attack in September 2016 by four men, identified by Indian authorities as members of the Pakistan-based JeM terrorist outfit, against an Indian army base located in the Kashmir town of Uri, killing a total of 19 soldiers, the Indian government announced that it had undertaken a series of undertaken military strikes against terrorist launch pads across the border and into so-called Azad Kashmir (Singh 2017). The deliberate decision to opt for a very limited retaliatory strike was the outcome of an ongoing strategic debate on how to deter and retaliate against terrorist infiltration into India while also limiting the possibilities of crisis escalation. Departing from its traditional retaliatory policy, India publicly branded its cross-border firing as "surgical strikes" and integrated them into a composite response which also included attempts to diplomatically isolate Pakistan at the regional and international levels. For instance, India supported global trade sanctions against Pakistan and considered rescinding Pakistan's Most Favored Nation status (Sharma 2016; Singh 2016). India also threatened to unilaterally withdraw from the Indus Waters Treaty, a bilateral agreement ratified in 1960 to share river waters (Jacob 2016). Finally, India successfully lobbied South Asian states to boycott the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit that Pakistan was to host in the weeks following the Uri attack. After Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka followed India's decision to not attend the summit, Pakistan chose to postpone the summit (Roche 2016).

The Indian post-Uri strategy demonstrated that India had opted for an unprecedented mixed strategy to deter Pakistan's use of non-state proxies. The use and public announcement of limited surgical strikes to directly target militants was part of a more conventional strategy to ensure the credibility of its military deterrence capacities. In addition, India used economic sanctions to increase the economic costs linked to Pakistan's resort to low-intensity warfare. Finally, In-



dia also opted for strategies which are usually used by secondary powers to bind the unipolar powers' behavior such as institutional balancing and cooperation through the SAARC to isolate Pakistan (for the concept, see He 2015). The use of institutional balancing strategies was reinforced through the mobilization of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) summit in September 2017. The BRICS Xiamen declaration condemned a series of extremist groups, including the Haqqani network, LeT, and JeM, which have been active in Pakistan (Aneja 2017). These composite efforts have sought to highlight the military, economic and reputational costs for Islamabad to use non-state proxy warfare to further its gains. While the long-term strategic consequences of this new strategy are not completely clear when it comes to deterring and shaping Pakistan's behavior, these new developments lead to a renewed policy and scholarly debate about the process of leadership maintenance in a nuclearized maintenance.

### **Conclusion: Stability in a Complex Region**

Understanding and managing the conditions for regional leadership maintenance in a nuclearized environment where terrorist activity has been proliferating is an understudied task. The first contention of this paper is theoretical: IR scholarship on leadership and multipolarity should further explore how under the condition of nuclearized rivalry states use non-state proxies to truncate power asymmetries in regional unipolar systems. More systematically incorporating non-state militant actors in models of nuclear deterrence and leadership recognizes both the theoretical and policy challenges to traditional regional polarity dynamics. The existent IR scholarship on power shifts has often concentrated on dyadic interstate standoffs, often at the global role, and missed the disruptive role of non-state actors in the outbreak and/or escalation of Indo-Pakistani nuclear crises.

The entanglement of militant non-state actors in India's and Pakistan's regional strategies creates an even grimmer outlook and threatens to undermine the potentially stabilizing effects of traditional nuclear deterrence. If a regional leader cannot deter "nuclear" militants, what alternative options remain for enabling stability and order in the region? Does this undermine broader efforts to institutionalize regional hierarchy in the Subcontinent? The 2016 Uri attacks allegedly committed by Pakistan-based militants and India's ensuing military retaliation as well as trade and institutional sanctions against the Pakistani state seem to have presented Pakistani policy-makers with new costs and a strategic dilemma. Will India manage to take back the initiative and to limit Pakistani possibilities of nuclear blackmail? Addressing this question is of immediate scholarly and policy relevance.

Second, while this paper has argued that the scholarship on regional leadership maintenance dynamics has built too exclusively on models of global hegemonic

contests, there are nevertheless important and underexplored lessons from the Cold War bipolar system which can be applied to the South Asian context. For instance, encouraging regular and institutionalized dialogue between regional nuclear rivals may provide opportunities to address the challenges posed by complex South Asian security dynamics more effectively. This is not a completely unique situation as it could be argued that the U.S. and USSR, as two rivals competing for global hegemony, faced similar issues in the initial stages of their nuclear weapons programs. While one could argue that Cold War models did not explicitly integrate the problem of non-state actors, the two rivals did learn to rein in the actions of their bloc allies and to put into place dialogue mechanisms to limit any escalation. Further research in early Cold War doctrines, command and control mechanisms, and gradual recognitions of red lines can help understand how nuclear learning has or has not occurred in the South Asian sub-system context (Khan, Jacobs & Burke 2014; Nye 1987, 1987).

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